DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 116 064 CG 010 233

AUTHOR Kincaid, Marylou B.
TITLE A Consciousness-Raising Program for Adult Women.
PUB DATE [72]
NOTE 31p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Counseling Programs; *Females; *Group Counseling; Higher Education; Program Descriptions; *Self Expression; *Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; Social Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Consciousness Raising

ABSTRACT

This program is a structured, 16-session consciousness-raising group for adult women which can be used in a university setting with women in continuing education or in a community setting with noncollege women. The program is designed to help women identify the influence of sex-role stereotyping on their lives, learn ways for effective sex-role conflict resolution, and define interests and personal goals. It has been given as a one credit-course by the Couseling Service staff at Phoenix Community College in Arizona for groups of 12 to 15 women. Participants have become more self-achievement-oriented and inner-directed following the course and report an increased appreciation for other women. (Author)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED116064

A Consciousness-Raising Program for Adult Women

Marylou Butler Kincaid
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

This program is a structured, 16-session consciousness-raising group for adult women which can be used in a university setting with women in continuing education or in a community setting with non-college women. The program is designed to help women identify the influence of sex-role stereotyping on their lives, learn ways for effective sex-role conflict resolution, and define interests and personal goals. It has been given as a one-credit course by the Counseling Service staff at Phoenix Community College in Arizona for groups of 12 to 15 women. Participants have become more self-achievement-oriented and inner-directed following the course and report an increased appreciation for other women.

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

CG 010 233

Session 1: Introduction

Step 1: The group leader explains the purposes of the group and calls for questions from participants:

"The purpose of this experience is to provide a series of structured activities which are aimed at helping you to remove the road blocks that keep you from making the choices that will lead to a fulfilling life. You will learn about how you communicate and make decisions, what goals and strengths you possess, and how society's expectations of women have affected your life. Are there any questions?"

Step 2: The group leader instructs each participant to select a partner she does not know or would like to know better. The pairs find a place in the room to sit down. Each participant tells her partner the qualities about herself that make her unique and what is presently most important to her as a person.

Step 3: After 10 minutes, the group leader brings the group together as a whole and instructs each participant to introduce her partner to the total group, one pair at a time.

Step 4: The group leader calls for participants' reactions to this way of getting acquainted. The group leader asks participants to respond to the following questions:

What did you like about this way of getting acquainted?
What made it difficult for you?
What did you learn about yourself?

Step 5: The group leader distributes Self's article [1] to participants and asks them to read it and write one question generated by the article on a 3 x 5 card to bring to the next session. They are also asked to underline the parts of the article with which they identify.

---

1 Self, Gerald. Search for Fulfillment: Women on the Move. Paper presented to the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, Las Vegas, Nevada, June 13-14, 1969. (See Appendix A.)

Session 2: Decision-making

Step 1: The group leader asks each participant to read her question, generated from the assigned article, aloud to the group and notes any similarities in them. The group leader explains that the questions will be dealt with in subsequent sessions.

Step 2: The group leader distributes an "Occupational Prestige Ranking Worksheet" (see following page) to each participant and reads the instructions as participants follow along. Participants are given seven (7) minutes to complete the worksheet individually.[1]

Step 3: The group leader instructs participants to divide into groups of four and distributes one copy of the "Occupational Prestige Ranking Worksheet" to each group. A ranking must be made by the total group, using group consensus. The ranking of each occupation must be agreed upon by each member before it becomes a part of the group's decision. Members should try to make each ranking one with which all members agree at least partially. Two ground rules: no averaging and no "majority rule" votes.

Step 4: After 30 minutes, the group leader calls participants together as a total group and announces the "correct" ranking. Participants are asked to react to the following questions:

What have you learned from this activity?
How do you make decisions both individually and in the group?
Compare how you make decisions in groups of all-women or in groups where men are present.
What do you want to change about your behavior in groups?
How can you make such a change?

Step 5: Participants are asked to complete the following homework assignment:

List the women you would like to come from the community or local colleges to tell you about their fields or provide information. Arrangements will be made to bring them to a class session during the second half of the program.

---

1 This activity is taken from: W. Pfeiffer and J. Jones. A Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training. Volume II. Iowa City: University Associates Press, 1970.

OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE RANKING WORKSHEET

Instructions: Rank the following occupations according to the prestige which is attached to them in the United States. Place a "1" in front of the occupation which you feel to be most prestigious, etc. all the way to "15," least prestigious.

_____Author of Novels

_____Newspaper columnist

_____Policeman

_____Banker

_____U.S. Supreme Court Justice

_____Lawyer

_____Undertaker

_____State Governor

_____Sociologist

_____Scientist

_____Public School Teacher

_____Dentist

_____Psychologist

_____College Professor

_____Physician

Session 3: Cultural Stereotyping

Step 1: The group leader instructs participants to take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns, placing the headings of "male" and "female" at the top of the columns. The group leader explains that the session will focus on the culture's definitions of masculinity and femininity. [1]

Step 2: The group leader instructs participants to list all the words in one column that occur to them when they think of females, women, and feminine. Participants do the same for the male column, responding to the terms males, men, and masculine.

Step 3: The group leader instructs participants to mark those words in each column that the culture dictates as appropriate for males and females. Participants then mark those qualities in both lists which they value. Allow 3-4 minutes for this activity.

Step 4: The group leader instructs participants to divide into trios and discuss their lists, noting the differences between what the culture values and what they value.

Step 5: After 5 minutes, the group leader calls the group together as a whole and asks for reactions to the following questions:

How are you influenced and affected by what the culture values for women?
Where did you learn these values and your own?
Do you feel any constraints on yourself as a woman? What are they?

Step 6: The group leader notes any similarities in comments of the participants and asks them to make a note of sex-role stereotyping they see during the following week in the media, and in their relationships. They are asked to reflect on the effects of such sex-role stereotyping on themselves.

1 This activity is taken from: P. Kepler & A. Schaef. Women and the New Creation. Board of Christian Education. United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1972.

Session 4: Feedback

Step 1: The group leader distributes a 5 x 8 card to each participant and instructs them to write three phrases which they feel describe themselves.

Step 2: Participants mill around the room with their cards in front of them. After 2-3 minutes, they pair off and each participant writes impressions of her partner on the back of her partner's card. Partners share their impressions with each other.

Step 3: The group leader calls group members together again and distributes a self-rating sheet (see following page) instructing participants to rate themselves.

Step 4: The group leader distributes a second copy of the rating sheet and instructs participants to pair off with a new partner and rate her on the same qualities. Partners discuss reactions to each other's ratings.

Step 5: The group leader calls the group together as a whole and asks them to respond to the following questions:

How so women see each other?
How do you see other women?

Step 6: The group leader asks participants to bring several popular magazines for the next session's activity. The group leader distributes two copies of a sentence completion exercise to each participant giving the following instructions:

"Ask your husband or a close friend (male or female) to fill in the sentence completion form I, responding in terms of how they see you. Fill in the sentence completion form II, responding in terms of how you view yourself. Compare your form with your husband's or friend's."

RATING SHEET

Characteristic	Rating					
1. I make decisions quickly and easily.	Yes	1	2	3	4	No
2. I am not intimidated by people in authority such as faculty, supervisors.	Yes	1	2	3	4	No
3. I am willing to trust other people.	Yes	1	2	3	4	No
4. I like to receive affection from others.	Yes	1	2	3	4	No
5. I can express my anger openly.	Yes	1	2	3	4	No
6. I enjoy being with other women.	Yes	1	2	3	4	No

SENTENCE COMPLETION I

(For husband or friend)

1. My wife's/friend's greatest strength is_____

_____.

2. My wife's/friend's greatest weakness is_____

_____.

3. My wife's/friend's main goal at present is_____

_____.

4. The thing I like best about my wife/friend is_____

_____.

5. The thing I like least about my wife/friend is_____

_____.

6. The issue of greatest importance to my wife/friend at present is_____

_____.

SENTENCE COMPLETION II

(For participant)

1. My greatest strength is _____

_____.

2. My greatest weakness is _____

_____.

3. My main goal at present is _____

_____.

4. The thing I like best about myself is _____

_____.

5. The thing I like least about myself is _____

_____.

6. The issue of greatest importance to me at present is _____

_____

_____.

Session 5: Your Self Image

Step 1: The group leader invites participants to respond to the following question:

> What was the most important difference between yours and your husband's/friend's sentence completion?

The group leader notes any similarities in participants' comments.

Step2: After 10-12 minutes, the group leader distributes a piece of newsprint and scotchtape or glue to participants, instructing them to make a collage that portrays their image of themselves at this point in time. Participants use magazines and are encouraged to work rapidly.

Step 3: After 25 minutes, the group leader instructs participants to mill around the room, examining the collages. Each participant finds a collage that interests her and negotiates with the creator of it to form a partnership. Pairs find a place to sit and share their collages with each other. Each member of the pair reacts to her partner's collage.

Step 4: The group leader calls group members together and invites them to make any additional comments to the large group about the activity or their collage.

Step 5: The group leader asks participants to write a problem during the following week on which they would like advice. This should be noted on a 3 x 5 card and the participants will bring it to the next session. The problems will be used in role playing situations. An example of a problem might be:

> How can I get my children to help more around the house now that I am in school and have less time?

Session 6: Problem Presentation

Step 1: The group leader instructs participants to divide into groups of four. One person in each group volunteers to present her problem to the group. The group leader instructs each small group to select a Problem Presenter, a Recommender, a Questioner, and one Observer.

Step 2: The group leader gives the following instructions, written on a card, to the Recommender in each group:

> You will help by giving advice or telling how you solved a similar problem.

The following intructions, written on a card, are given to the Questioner in each group:

> You will help by asking questions to clarify your own and the presenter's thinking.

Observers are instructed to make notes on the following questions, written on cards:

> What were the problem presenter's reactions to the recommender and the questioner?
> How were they different?
> Share any other observations you have of the entire process.

Step 3: The group leader asks group members to come together, placing themselves in concentric circles with Problem Presenters in the middle, Questioners surrounding them, Recommenders next, and Observers on the outside.

Step 4: The group leader asks Problem Presenter to tell who gave her the most help. Questioners share how they felt; Recommenders do the same. Observers comment on the entire process.

Step 5: The group leader invites group members to read their problem to the group. The group leader comments on any similarities in those that are presented.

Session 7: Relationships

Step 1: The group leader instructs participants to take a piece of paper and put a circle in the center of it which represents themselves. They place other circles on the paper which represent people who play significant roles in their lives at the present time. Deceased persons may be included whom they feel are still an influence on their lives now. Circles are also drawn which represent jobs or activities which are currently influencing participants.

They develop a graphic picture that represents their lives and their relationships.[1] The group leader makes an illustrative drawing on newsprint while giving directions to participants.

Step 2: Participants draw lines of influence on their sociogram according to the following instructions:

a) If a relationship is one in which you are mostly influenced by another person, draw a line with an arrow pointing from the other person toward you.
b) If a relationship is one in which you most influence the other person, draw a line with an arrow pointing from you to the other person.
c) If a relationship is equal in influence, draw a line with an arrow on each end.

The group leader illustrates with newsprint.

Step 3: The group leader instructs participants to choose a partner and share as much of their sociogram as they wish. Participants discuss the patterns they see developing on their sociogram. They also discuss changes they would like to make in their relationship patterns.

Step 4: The group leader distributes an evaluation sheet (see following page) to participants and instructs them to fill it out during the following week. Participants are to choose one relationship they consider important and evaluate it according to the qualities on the evaluation sheet.

---

1 This activity is taken from: P. Kepler & A. Schaef. Women and the New Creation. Board of Christian Education. United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1972.

EVALUATION SHEET

Directions: Select one important relationship on your sociogram and place an x on each continuum indicating whether the qualities on the left characterize you (mark 1) or those on the right (mark 3). If you use equal amounts of both qualities in the relationship, mark 2. Draw a line connecting your x's and examine the pattern that emerges.

Relationship: _____

Nurturer	1	2	3	Nurtured
Controller	1	2	3	Controlled
Educator	1	2	3	Educated
Forgiver	1	2	3	Forgiven
Lover	1	2	3	Loved
User	1	2	3	Used
Exploiter	1	2	3	Exploited
Needer	1	2	3	Needed
Good	1	2	3	Bad
One-up	1	2	3	One-down
Relator	1	2	3	Related to
Seducer	1	2	3	Seduced
Initiator	1	2	3	Responder
Challenger	1	2	3	Challenged
Winner	1	2	3	Loser
Understander	1	2	3	Understood
Punisher	1	2	3	Punished
Enabler	1	2	3	Enabled
Suppressor	1	2	3	Suppressed
Oppressor	1	2	3	Oppressed
Joy releaser	1	2	3	Joy released in
Supporter	1	2	3	Supported

Session 8: Relationship Role Playing

Step 1: The group leader invites participants to share what they learned from the preparation of the evaluation sheet distributed at the end of the previous session.

Step 2: Participants are asked to select one relationship from their sociogram that is not presently satisfying. It might be the one that was evaluated by the participant for homework.

Step 3: Participants are asked to think about what they want to say to the person selected to alter the relationship, increase communication, or develop understanding with that person.

Step 4: The group leader asks for a volunteer who will describe the relationship to be role played. The group leader and group member move into the middle of the group and engage in an exemplary role playing. When they have reached an impasse in the dialogue, the group leader and member switch roles, at the direction of the group leader.

Step 5: After 10 minutes, group members are invited to comment on the role playing and to make suggestions.

Step 6: The group leader asks for two volunteers, one who will describe a troublesome relationship she has and another who will role play it with the first volunteer. The two volunteers engage in dialogue and when an impasse is reached, the group leader instructs them to switch roles.

Step 7: After 10 minutes, group members are invited to comment on the role playing, and to make suggestions.

Step 8: The group leader asks for two more volunteers who will follow the directions in step 6.

Step 9: After 10 minutes, group members are invited to comment on the role playing and to make suggestions.

Step 10: Those who volunteered to do the role playing are invited to share what they learned from the activity and discussion. The remaining group members are invited to do the same.

Session 9: Simulation - Conflict Resolution

Step 1: The group leader instructs participants to divide into two groups of six. The leader explains that the session will focus on role playing and conflict resolution. Leader gives a role and some instructions which are written on a card to each member of each small group. The roles assigned to participants are:

Husband, wife, child-age 15, mother-in-law, father-in-law, observer.

Instructions for each role are:

Husband - play the role as you wish
Wife - you want to go, this is something you have always wanted
Child - you don't want to go; you like high school and your friends
Mother-in-law - play the role as you wish
Father-in-law - play the role as you wish
Observer - makes notes on the following questions:
a) How was the decision reached?
b) What kind of sex-role stereotyping existed?

Step 2: The group leader reads problem situation and instructs groups to try to reach some consensus on the problem as they play their assigned roles. [1] The situation is:

The husband is a systems analyst for IBM. Wife works part-time in a research laboratory. She has been offered a full time scholarship in Microbiology at a University 1,000 miles away from home. Inlaws live within walking distance of the family. The group must decide whether the family will move.

Step 3: After 25-30 minutes, the group leader asks the observer in each group to share her reactions to the entire process and to the assigned questions in her small group.

Step 4: The group leader calls group members together and invites participants to react to the role playing activity and to share what they learned from it. The group leader announces that next session will focus on role playing of another conflict situation.

---

1 This activity was developed by M. Ferguson and L. Peluso, both former graduate students in the Department of Counselor Education, Arizona State University.

Session 10: Simulation - Conflict Resolution

Step 1: The group leader instructs participants to divide into two groups of six. Participants are asked to mix up their groups and meet with different people. The group leader gives a role and some instructions which are written on a card to each member of each small group. The roles assigned to participants are:

Husband,wife, doctor, husband and wife (best friends of the family), observer

Instructions for each role are:

Husband - this your wife's decision; after all, it's her problem
Wife - you'll go crazy if you have another child; enough is enough! You think your husband should consider a vasectomy.
Doctor - you are concerned for the health of the wife
Friends of the family - you are neutral and willing to help
Observer - see previous session

Step 2: The group leader reads the problem situation and instructs groups to try to reach some consensus on the problem as they play their assigned roles. The situation is:

This family has four children. The husband and wife do not want any more. A decision must be made on a suitable method of contraception. The wife has experienced difficulty in using the pill. Make a decision.

Step 3: After 15-30 minutes, the group leader asks the observer in each group to share her reactions to the entire process and to the assigned questions in her small group.

Step 4: Do the same as above with the following problem situation:

The divorcee was married for 16 years to a successful lawyer who fell in love with his secretary and divorced his wife. After three years as a divorcee, the woman wants to remarry. Make a decision.

Instructions for each role are:

Divorcee - you are in love and want to remarry but are afraid you'll get hurt again
Daughter - you don't want a new father; he may impose some limits that Mom doesn't
Mother of Divorcee - you are ashamed of your daughter for failing in one marriage; you don't want her to embarrass you again
Male suitor - you love this woman and want to marry her; you don't care that she is divorced

Session 10: Simulation - Conflict Resolution (continued)

Female friend - do what you feel is best
Observer - see previous session

Step 5: The group leader calls group members together and invites participants to react to the role playing activity and to share what they learned from it.

Session 11: Lifestyle Planning

Step 1: The group leader instructs participants to take a piece of paper and draw a long line putting their birthdate at the beginning and their expected age of death at the end. Participants place an x where they are now.

Step 2: On the line between birth and present age, participants put a mark for each experience that they feel has made a significant contribution in developing who and what they are now. Participants mark each one with a word or phrase so they will know what each represents. [1]

Step 3: Participants form trios and each person shares as much of her lifeline as she wishes.

Step 4: The group leader calls the trios together at the end of the session--with 10 minutes remaining--to discuss participants' reactions to the activity.

Step 5: The group leader asks participants to complete the following assignment for homework:

Make a list of three values, strengths, abilities and wishes. Check the one that you give first priority in each list. Also indicate a one year goal, a five year goal, and a ten year goal on your lifeline.

---

1 This activity is taken from: P. Kepler & A. Schaef. Women and the New Creation. Board of Christian Education. United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1972

Session 12: Interest Exploration

Step 1: Each participant is asked by the group leader to tell the group the most important value, strength, ability, and wish from the lists prepared for homework.

Step 2: The group leader distributes copies of each member's Strong Vocational Interest Blank profile for examination. (Group member have taken the SUIB at the Counseling Service during the early part of the group). The group leader explains the format of the profile, the general scoring system, the occupational categories, and general approach to interpretation of the profile. The group leader invites comments and questions from group members.

Step 3: The group leader instructs participants to form pairs to discuss their SVIB profiles. The group leader circulates among the groups to answer any questions that arise.

Step 4: The group leader calls participants together and asks for reactions to the following questions:

What does your SVIB profile tell you about yourself and your interests that is new?
How do your results affect or give direction to your plans for yourself, especially in terms of education or career?
What is the greatest obstacle to you in reaching your goals?
What is the greatest aid to you in reaching your goals?

The group leader notes any similarities in obstacles or aids mentioned by participants.

Step 5: The group leader gives participants a list of reasons women often use to keep from doing what they want to do. Participants are asked to check those they use in the week ahead and add any additional ones to the list which are not included.

SOME REASONS I USE TO KEEP FROM DOING WHAT I WANT TO DO

1. Need for approval or advice from authority figures: husband, leaders, teachers, experts.
2. "My husband wouldn't like it."
3. "How do I do it, who exactly do I call?"
4. "I'm a procrastinator."
5. "Well, that's the way I am."
6. "I had a terrible childhood."
7. Getting involved in programs that have potential for change--work-shops, classes, counseling--but defeat them by putting the responsibility for change onto the activity or the person leading the activity. "Here I am, change me."
8. "My family needs me."
9. Making other people's reactions so important that what they think overrides what I believe.
10. Being a follower, rather than a leader.
11. Never taking risks, doing the unknown.
12. Never taking policy-making leadership responsibilities.
13. "I've been 'out of it' too long."
14. "I could , but...."

Session 13: Seeking Information in the Outside World

Step 1: The group leader invites participants to share their reactions to the homework assignment. Each person is asked to share a new reason that she added to her list during the previous week; one that she uses to keep from doing what she wants.

Step 2: The group leader explains that the focus of this session is on ways to gather information. Participants are asked to write on a sheet of paper any specific field of interest on which they would like to have more information. The group leader explains that this could include:

a) education
b) volunteer activity
c) employment opportunities
c) creative self-expression

Step 3: The group leader instructs participants to form trios and discuss where such information can be obtained.

Step 4: The group leader calls participants together and asks for two volunteers to seek out information for each of the following areas:

a) How to study
b) Reading improvement
c) Career opportunities for adult women
d) Aptitude and interest testing
e) Curriculum planning

Additional areas identified by participants are also assigned to pairs.

Step 5: The group leader asks each pair to write a brief report on the information obtained to bring to session 15, one week following.

Session 14: Resource People

Step 1: The group leader has arranged for resource women to come to this session from the community of local colleges to share information about their fields or provide information about the college. These are women whom the participants identified in session #2.

Step 2: The group leader introduces the visitors to participants and indicates an area of the room where each speaker will meet those interested in what she has to say.

Step 3: Participants divide according to their interests with no more than three listening to a speaker at any one time.

Step 4: Participants rotate every 15 minutes from one speaker to another, gathering the information they desire. Speakers are asked to prepare a 10 minute talk and allow 5 minutes for questions; the talk is delivered four times during the session.

Session 15: Strength Bombardment

Step 1: The group leader asks one member of each pair to give a summary of the report which was prepared as homework for session 13.

Step 2: The group leader calls participants together and asks for a volunteer who will list the strengths she feel she possesses, stating these aloud to the entire group. Remaining participants "bombard" the volunteer with the strengths they feel she possesses. [1]

Step 3: The group leader asks participants to each take a turn listing aloud their strengths to the group and receiving feedback from other participants on their strengths. Each group member predicts for others what they see them doing in five years.

Step 4: The group leader invites participants to react to the activity and asks them to name a new strength which they have discovered but did not realize or believe they possessed.

Step 5: The group leader distributes an evaluation form and asks group members to complete and return it at the last group session.

1 This activity is taken from: H.Otto. Group Methods to Actualize Human Potential. Chicago: Stone-Brandel Center, 1967

COURSE EVALUATION

M W
T TH

CO 100

1. Was this group valuable for you? If so, how?_____

_____

_____

2. Has it changed your view of yourself? of others? of your goals?

_____

_____

3. In what ways did it not meet your needs or expectations?____

_____

_____

4. What changes would you recommend in the activities or group structure?_____

_____

5. Were the homework assignments helpful? If so, how? If not, why?

_____

_____

6. Evaluate the facillitator. If possible, suggest areas for improvement or change._____

_____

_____

Additional comments:_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Session 16: Summary and Next Steps

Step 1: The group leader asks participants to form trios and evaluate the entire group experience, focusing on the following questions:

What did you learn about yourself that is new?
What activities were most helpful? not useful?
What next steps do you want to take to make changes in your situation, self, relationships?

The group leader instructs each group to select a spokeswoman who will report to the entire group.

Step 2: The group leader calls participants together and asks the spokeswomen, one at a time, to summarize their small group discussion. The group leader invites remaining participants to add additional comments if they so desire.

Step 3: The group leader asks each participant to share with the entire group the next step she plans to take after the group is ended, including any additional information she feels she needs and where she might obtain it.

Appendix A:

Search for Fulfillment
WOMEN ON THE MOVE:

Some Common Psychological Problems

I would like to talk about a group which has been of great interest to me--women. Specifically, I will address myself to middle-class and upper middle-class American women who are, in my terms, "on the move." By this I mean that they have come to a point in their lives where they recognize a vague lack of fulfillment, a void in their normal life pattern and, as a result, are seeking to make constructive changes in their life style. As a group they start their quest for "something more meaningful" at an average age of thirty-nine; are interested primarily in part-time activity outside of the home; and come from comfortable suburban surroundings. These women are well within normal limits of emotional adjustment, most (83%) are married and, as a group, are committed to maintain--but enrich--what they define as their major responsibility and major source of gratification: their husbands, children and homes.

This paper is based on observation and clinical inference drawn from my experiences at the Continuum Center of Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan. Since its inception in 1964 approximately two thousand women, largely from Detroit's vast suburban areas, have participated in our "Investigation into Identity" program offered on the University campus and in community centers. My comments are not, however, derived empirically and will not meet the usual stringent criteria for scientific inquiry.

This presentation is divided into two major sections. In the first section I hope to briefly describe psychological characteristics commonly found in normal middle-class suburban housewife-mothers. Later, I will comment on some typical conflicts and defenses found with these same women in the process of mobilizing their energies and changing their lives.

With this outline in mind, I would like to focus attention on three commonly observed psycho-social characteristics that occur in this population. The most common characteristic of this group of middle-class American housewife-mothers is the pervasive lack of confidence in their own ability. Such lack of confidence, it seems, is generated from the sparse utilization of talents in a competitive and rewarding environment that the home, due to over-exposure and boredom no longer provides.

A paper presented to the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, Las Vegas, Nevada, June 13-14, 1969 by Gerald Self, Ph.D. Psychologist, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan.

American housewives have relatively little feedback concerning their own real abilities, and lack external criteria for evaluating themselves. In addition, most women that I have interviewed have not fully utilized intellectual, academic or employment skills for approximately fifteen to twenty years. Thus, they all too ofter underestimate their competence and personal worth as they survey the inevitable problems with husbands, children and routine housework. Often, the husband's achievements become the unrealistic yardstick to which comparisons of their own rusty skills are made. Such negative comparisons, in the absence of objective criteria, generate the "lack of confidence" so typical of this group.

The sapped confidence of the American housewife-mother contributes to the second major psycho-social condition of this population--depression. Relatively few women that I have seen recognize this condition. Certainly, they will readily admit to occasionally feeling "blue," but they do not recognize their chronic physical complaints, their inability to mobilize energy, their waning interest in long-held activities and friends, their lack of zest of living and general reluctance to fully participate in the world outside of the cloistered home as depression. In clinical terms this is a mild to moderate, but fairly pervasive, depressive syndrome.

Two psychoanalytic hypotheses are of interest when explaining this surprising phenomenon in this affluent and privileged group. It is generally held that depression stems from the psychic mechanisms of (1) real or perceived loss and (2) anger which is not appropriately or directly expressed in the environment. Many normal middle-aged women, consciously or unconsciously, identify a loss of youth, loss of sexual functions and sexual attractiveness, and enter a protracted period of mourning which forms a complement to this depressive syndrome. The menopausal crisis becomes the focal point of this generalized concern and dramatically reinforces many women's sense of loss and incompleteness. Additionally, the perceived loss of ability to function and achieve in the "real world" becomes an extremely important, but seldom recognized, dimension associated with this depressive condition.

The sociological setting of the middle and upper-middle class often conspires to assist the "middle-age blues." Typically, the man is overcommitted to the pursuit of commercial or professional activity. His wife, left with long hours at home, near total responsibility for the care of children and, quite often, with little affectional feedback from her husband, perceives a real loss of love. This all too common and reality-based loss is a crucial dynamism of the depressed American housewife-mother.

The perceived loss of love, attractiveness, functioning ability or whatever else the woman realistically identifies, or imagines, usually generates great anger. But who can be blamed for one's own age? Or menopause? Thus, many women are caught in the dilemma of trying to contain a rage whose expression has no appropriate target.

Most often, especially in the more proper middle-class groups, this rage is internalized and directed toward the self. Anger so directed is responsible for the often voiced feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy and loss of joy in living. The peculiar manner in which many women deal with the normal anger generated by their environment is the second major cause of the feminine depressive syndrome which occurs with such great frequency.

Along with several other investigators, I will point to the "identity crisis" as the third major psychological characteristic of the middle-class American housewife-mother. This condition seems to arise because these women have devoted the major portion of their energies to the attainment of other people's goals. The husband's occupational advancement and the children's academic progress often assume prime importance. After years of such sacrifice many women lose sight of their own needs and long-germ goals. Aspirations which were once held are often forgotten or discarded and a sense of "directionlessness" prevails. It is particularly poignant when women ask themselves, at about fory-five, "So who am I, now that the children have gone?

These women, often confused about their direction and lacking a very solid sense of "who they are, " encounter considerable difficulty when relating openly with others. They inherit a sense of pervasive loneliness and isolation.

Thus far, I have focused on three common psycho-social characteristics of middle-class American women: lack of confidence in their own skills, unrelenting depression, and the "identity crisis." Though certainly not pleasant experiences, they do serve a very positive function for the woman. The an xiety and discomfort arising out of such conditions stimulate movement; the need to change and to attain, in the women's own words, "something more meaningful."

It is at this point that I switch from the consideration of problems which I feel most middle-class American women experience, to a review of typical reactions and defensive maneuvers employed by these same women as they consider a more active existence outside of the home.

Almost universally, "women on the move" experience a great sense of guilt, concerning what I shall call "The American Dream." Most often the marital couple mutually define and mutally work toward a long list of material and non-material components of their own particular dream. A typical list would probably include such accomplishments as a home in the suburbs (with a good school system), two cars, college for the children, responsible and prestigious employment for the man, travel, cultural and artistic involvement and, of course, a dog--preferably a large one.

The women that I work with have attained the material components of this dream and usually recognize all too well the dear price that their spouse has paid and continues to pay for this accomplishment.

Finding herself in this "privileged material position" and still recognizing some gnawing sense of incompleteness and void in her life, the woman experiences immense guilt. Immediately she asks the question, "What's wrong with me?" The answer is likely to be her own selfishness and lack of appreciation for what has been done for her.

The attainment of "The American Dream" brings with it another central problem that is usually not anticipated. The family's affluence buys the wonderful gift of time. This time that the woman inherts, however, presents a real challenge; a challenge to use it for constructive, joyous or growth-producing ends. The woman's failure to use this time well may serve to further compound the guilt generated by her lack of fulfillment when that dream is attained.

The second major issue which is confronted by "women on the move" concerns vitally important but usually unspoken questions centering about dependence and independence. Contemplated or actual involvement in activities outside the home, especially if successfully accomplished, often threatens to upset the dependent relationship which the woman has enjoyed, and needs--deeply needs--to maintain. Accomplishments outside the home also raise concerns (often unconscious) about her own femininity (or lack of it) and fears that her husband's "ego" will be damaged. Ambition by these women is often termed aggressiveness and the emotionally healthy desire to use talents and energies to the fullest is seen as negative and undesirable.

Typically, the male is not greatly threatened by his wife's activity but he soon discovers that movement and change on her part necessitate a change in the emotional homeostasis of the marriage. Most often, other family members share the emotional and interpersonal rewards of the woman's accomplishments and are positively affected by her growing sense of worth and well-being.

Closely related to the dependence-independence issue is the woman's directly and consistently expressed needs for the blessings of some authority figure. Certainly, this is a reasonable expectation for the woman who has experienced dependent relationships with her parents and only shortly thereafter with her husband. Most often, the individual desperately attempts to manipulate the expert, the psychologist, respected peers and, of course, her husband into assuming responsibility for her own behavior. Such Oedipal blessings, if attained, serve the dual purpose of relieving the anxiety generated by the new activity and, importantly, define a ready-made target for the woman's frustration if she should fail in this new venture.

Contemplated movement into the threatening environment outside the home usually necessitates considerable talking-through for the women with husbands and friends. Cognizance of their own thoughts and feelings, and the ability to express these to another person, is thus implied and often touches off longstanding conflicts centering around intimacy.

To be sure, problems of intimacy are universal in the culture, but do seem particularly pointed with women who are engaged in the anxious process of making constructive change in their lives.

At this point I would like to consider some methods that these women use as they attempt to deal with this anxious process of being "on the move." The discussion no longer focuses upon such near universal issues as guilt, dependence-independence, authority relationships and intimacy, but rather is directed to typical defensive mechanisms that individual women use during this frightening time of change and possible growth.

The most commonly observed defense mechanism is that of obsessional introspection. Quite often, women engage in endless philosophical inquiry concerning their role in life, their "contribution to society," the effects of their own activities on their husbands, children and their own mental health. As an extension of this theme, many detailed questions are generated about college students' acceptance of an "old lady" or whether employers will hire her (especially in competition with attractive younger women). Often, too, there is endless obsessional concern with the pros and cons of various occupations or specific academic courses. Such questions, of course, can serve constructive ends (identifying reality). They can, and often do, however, serve to insulate the individual against the anxiety generated by her own movement. Thus, the self-defeating "payoff" for this obsessional behavior is reduced anxiety--but the price is immobilization.

A second anxiety-reducing, but ultimately self-limiting defensive maneuver, is clinically identified as "projection". Simply stated, projection is the tendency to blame others for one's own thoughts and feelings. This is classically observed in the frequently heard statement, "I would love to go to college, but George won't let me." Seemingly, the individual is unwilling to assume psychological ownership of her own feelings of inadequacy and fear, and it becomes all too easy to project the source of her difficulties onto others. Again, the payoff is a reduction of anxiety. The price: immobilization.

"Women on the move" employ considerable projection (and some minor reality distortion) in an attempt to avoid the anxiety that their own action has generated. Thus, George, or some other agent, is identified as the source of frustration while the woman's own internal resistances to self-actualization are overlooked.

Still another defense mechanism which is commonly employed by this group is the need to retain or revert to earlier forms of (secure) adjustment. Faced with the anxious possibility of change, many women find routine housework suddenly comforting. College-education and intellectually capable individuals are attracted to (low stress) secretarial and similar positions far beneath their capabilities.

This defensive need to cling to the known and secure aspects of the environment is also reflected in many women's openly expressed desire for authority's approval of their behavior (as in childhood) and is related to the dependence-independence issue noted above. The same tendency to revert to earlier forms of adjustment is also demonstrated by the fluidity existing between the traditional feminine roles (helplessness, dependence and sexual attractiveness) and the newly acquired model of activity, competence and self-reliance. When faced with frustrations and stress, many women find the "traditional" feminine role quite attractive and use it defensively. Again, the payoff is reduced anxiety. The price is usually impaired functioning ability and a decrease in the real gratification that the environment can provide.

In summary, I have attempted to briefly outline some major psychological characteristics, poignant conflicts and defensive mechanisms I have observed in a population of normal, middle-class American women as they contemplate or actually engage in activity outside of a protected, and often unstimulating, home environment. Because the focus has been "psychological problems," the presentation of necessity has been somewhat negativistic in tone. I would, however, like to again stress a positive dimension which typically accrues from the crises of this period. In effect, the turmoil and stress created in the lives of many American women in their middle years become the motivating force behind their effort, often desperate effort, to change their situation. Roughly two-thirds of the women I have seen make some change in their life style and report that their general sense of well-being and real gratification from the environment is thus enhanced.

Adopting a long-term perspective or perhaps even a philosophical view, I interpret the "middle-age blues" as a time when identity concerns are openly dealt with and, often, constructively resolved.

I would like to close with some reference to today's theme, "A Focus on our Challenges and Choices." Following the somewhat-negativistic approach taken thus far, I will reverse that order and observe that middle-class American women have a fantastically wide variety of choice available to them. Their choices can range from the neurotic, destructive, self-effacing behavior through the normal experience of moderate depression and lack of confidence and, finally, at the constructive end of the continuum, to a more vital participation in the environment where-in their own skills are utilized and real gratification from the environment can occur. I would see the challenge in rather simplistic terms--to constantly gather and use knowledge about oneself and about the environment and to overcome the internal and real roadblocks to full actualization of potential.